

Biggest Little City in the World" (3/5)

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****Disclaimers in part 1****

"Look." She pointed up to a bat ray gliding over their heads. They watched as it slowly skimmed the length of the glass, then circled back to swim over their heads again. Scully resisted the impulse to say "Whoa" again, opting instead for, "Doesn't it look elegant?"

"Elegant?"

"The way it moves, barely moving its body. It just looksâ€¦ elegant. But," she added, looking down at the map she'd gotten at the ticket window. "He's not supposed to be in this room."

"He? Scully, are you ascribing personalities to non-human objects again?"

"No, it really was male," she said matter-of-factly as she looked over at a display of a "sunken ship" that had various small creatures swimming through it. "I hope that's not supposed to look real."

"Nah, the rest of this is designed pretty well, that must've been intentional. But it'sâ€¦ the only cheesy thing I've seen in here so far."

The conveyor belt took them into the next room, where the small inhabitants were replaced with larger scale life. The first thing Mulder saw was another bat ray. He studied it as it swam past his left side, realizing she was right, it did look elegant. Scully meanwhile was looking around the water almost frantically. "Scully, what is it? What did you see?"

"It's not what I saw, it's what I want to see. But I don't see it." She glanced around again, then looked up at a tiger shark. "She's huge."

"She? Scully, I have to ask, how do you know the difference between male and female of these things?"

"Huh?" She looked up at him, abandoning her scrutiny of the obviously pregnant shark, then pointed to another bat ray. "You know how you said the sea lions looked relaxed? To me, those look relaxed."

"Probably because they look calm and quiet," he replied immediately.

Thinking about how accurate his assessment was, Scully missed a third of their trip through the room. When the conveyor belt stopped, she took a quick look around. Damn. End of the ride, and she hadn't seen what she wanted to see. She looked over her shoulder back into the aquarium. It would be childish to just run back, but she sighed. "That was nice."

"Want to go through again?"

"What?"

"Do you want to go through again?" he repeated, pointing to a sign that said "This Way To Re-Enter."

Hell, yeah, she thought. Her response was "If you're sure you want to, yes" as she walked briskly to the start of the conveyor.

"Can we walk on it this time, rather than just standing?" Mulder asked. "I feel like a dork."

"Sure." If it gets me to the next room faster, why not? She thought.

"Is that the same bat ray?" Mulder asked as they started walking.

"Yeah, it is. There must be only one in this part. He seems to be hanging around in here, just swimming back and forth as close to the people as he can get. Maybe he's interested in the people."

"You think so, Doctor Doolittle?" She let the comment pass as he said, "Starfish don't move, do they?"

"Well, they have to move at some point, otherwise they'd never end up where they are."

"Oh, very Zen, Scully. No, I meant— have you seen any of them move at all?"

She thought about his question for a minute. "No, you're right, I haven't. But I don't think that's an X-File either," she said with a smile. "Quit looking for weird things that aren't there, will you?"

He was interrupted from replying by catching a glimpse of a large

object swimming along the bottom of the water. "Look," he pointed down. "Tiger shark, in here. Just one. Must be a renegade, like the bat ray." Which, he noted, was still busily swimming back and forth over his head.

Scully laughed as she tried to repeat "renegade tiger shark."

"About this bat ray, though, it keeps swimming around us. I think it likes you."

"Likes me?" Yeah, that'd be about right, she thought. Mulder attracts handsome waiters, I attract sea life. "Mulder, I really doubt it."

"Maybe it's attracted to your hair? They probably don't see a lot of redheads."

"You're assuming other redheads don't pass through here by the hundreds daily?"

Mulder shrugged then stepped off the conveyor belt. He stared at the floor of the aquarium, following the movement of a large bat ray in the exhibit as it skittered across the sand. He turned to point it out to Scully, but she wasn't by his side. After a worried look around, he found her standing on her tiptoes, face pressed against the glass, angling for the best position to view something in the tank he couldn't quite make out. What could be attracting her attention that much, he wondered. He stood next to her, peering into the water, seeing nothing until one tentacle slapped up against the bottom of the glass. He jumped back as she smiled and craned her neck to look more closely. "Scully, what are you doing?"

"Watching the octopus," she replied without looking at him. Her concentration was so intent that he knew showing her the Monster Bat Ray wouldn't happen just yet. He glanced around, his eyes catching on what seemed to be the largest tiger shark. Studying its underside, he looked for whatever sign could be provided to determine if it was male or female, knowing that he didn't want to ask Scully. After a few minutes, he hadn't seen enough to make a determination one way or the other. His partner, meanwhile, had remained immobile in front of the glass. He looked over her shoulder, watching the octopus' activity. Its tentacles moved ever-so slightly, not enough to cause it to actually move anywhere, and its air holes opened and closed slowly in a rhythm that could lull one to sleep if they weren't careful. He couldn't see what his partner found so fascinating in this creature, unless its lazy movements had somehow hypnotized her. Mulder just found it sort of creepy. "Scully, c'mon!"

"Wait!" she said, waving her hand in his direction in a "go away" gesture. "I want to see if it's going to move more."

"You mean move at all?"

"Whatever," she replied dismissively.

"Scully. You're standing around waiting to see if an octopus is going to move? Slightly more energized than watching paint dry, but why?"

Reluctantly, she looked over at him. He had on his "serious inquiry" face â€" he really wanted to know. Great. "Mulder," she sighed. "I don't know. I just want to see what's going to happen." She turned back toward the tank the instant she finished the sentence.

"Scully, did you used to poke things with a stick just to see what would happen?"

"Yeah, until a cat bit me," she said automatically, then took a suspicious look at him. "Why?"

"No reason. Look at the size of that tiger shark."

A glance over her shoulder provided her a full view of the shark Mulder had been studying before. "Yeah, he's the biggest one in here."

He again. Now it was bothering him â€" he needed to know how it could be so readily determined what the sex of these damn things were. Without asking Scully, of course. Help arrived in the form of a tour guide passing their way. "Excuse me," he tapped her on the shoulder. "Is that tiger shark the largest one in here?"

The tour guide (Teresa, as her name tag read) followed the path of his pointing. "Yes, he's the largest one here."

"You said he. How do you tell the difference between the males and females?"

Teresa seemed temporarily taken aback by his question. She tried to think of a logical, preferably quick explanation that would satisfy him. Why a cute guy would be interested in the genitalia of sharks was something she didn't want to dwell on. "Well, it'sâ€" you seeâ€"

"Mulder," Scully cut in. "By that thing right there."

"Huh?" He focused his attention on Scully. "What thing? Those weird pointed things near his tail?"

"Tail? No, no, not those. Theâ€" you knowâ€" there." She pointed to the underside of the midsection of a shark swimming behind him.

"Where? I don't see where you're pointing."

"Okay, let me try one at my eye level. There," she said, pointing to one swimming at her shoulder level. "Those two flaps right there. Now do you get it?"

"Okay, I see the flaps. Male sharks have those flaps?"

"Yes," Scully replied, a little exasperated.

"What are they?"

"Mulder, don't tell me your mother never explained the difference between boys and girls."

"Wellâ€¦ she did, but mine doesn't look like that."

"I didn't think so."

"What?" Mulder's shock was highly evident in his voice. "You haven't seen it, have you?"

Teresa shook her head. Cute guy's friend seemed to have explained it well, but this conversation was getting weird. Better his friend deal with it than her, she thought as she moved away.

Meanwhile, Scully's entire face was frozen in The Look, the one that advised Mulder she was not amused.

"Seriouslyâ€¦ you've never seen it, right?"

She sighed. "I know how we can end this right now."

"Yeah, how?"

"Drop 'em, Mulder. We'll compare you to the shark once and for all." Her expression remained blank as she watched Mulder's face contort into mass confusion, then she laughed when his mouth opened a little.

"Scully, you're weird," he grumbled as she stopped laughing.

"Can I go back to the octopus now?"

"No. I think you've stared at that thing for way too long. C'mon." He started to walk, and she reluctantly trailed behind after one last glimpse of a wavering tentacle.

He made it as far as the elevator before he caught the expression on his partner's face. If she could have looked any more dejected over something so trivial, he would have been amazed. "Scully."

"Yes?"

"Do you want to go through one more time?"

"Can we?" she said brightly, then moved briskly towards the entrance again. He caught sight of Teresa standing by the elevator, giving him a very clear "you people are very strange" look. "My partner, she likes octopuses," he shrugged.

"Octopi," she corrected him. "It'll impress her if you say octopi."

"Thanks for the tip," he said as he walked back in.

Scully was waiting for him directly underneath an eight legged starfish. "Look, this thing is massive."

"Wow. How did we miss this one before? Wait a second, is it missing â€¦ what are they, legs?"

"Appendages, Mulder, say it with meâ€¦"

"Appendages, sure, but there must be a technical term for them. C'mon

Scully what is it?"

"I don't know, Mulder, I must have missed 'Starfish Week' on The Learning Channel."

"Is that where you learned about the shark thing, The Learning Channel?"

"No, 'Shark Week' is on the Discovery Channel, not TLC. But can we not go back to the shark thing again?"

Geek alert, she called it TLC. "Okay, no more shark thing. But, is it missing an appendage?"

"Don't think so. I'm sorry Mulder, there's no X-File here on mutant sea creatures."

"Oh, damn. And here I was thinking we could turn this into a working vacation."

She took a long pause before responding. "I'm just going to walk away now, okay?" She knew it was a joke, but on so many levels she just couldn't laugh at it.

He caught up with her at the exit to the room. "I'm sorry, really. Don't get mad at me, I couldn't take another bumper car ride to get rid of your tension."

She was stunned. He knew? Oxford-educated psychiatrist or not, he'd never been too swift at figuring her out, so this little insight was a pleasant shock. She stood for a moment, her gaping mouth resembling one of the creatures they'd just passed, until she covered her amazement with, "Does that mean I can never use that strategy again?"

"Well, if you think it's necessary, maybe. Just warn me beforehand. If you say the word 'bumper,' I'll know to bring a neck brace with me the next time I see you."

She laughed pleasantly, then made a beeline for the octopus. Bringing up the rear, Mulder joined her in the exact same spot she'd been in before, this time surrounded by a group of eight year-olds who were peering into the water with her. "Did it move yet?" he asked.

"Not yet," she replied.

"Maybe another one would be good in here. With more octopi, there'd be a better chance of catching one of them moving."

"Octopi?" She looked at him, clearly impressed. "Are you sure you didn't see Octopi Week on The Learning Channel?" Before he could say anything, she turned her attention back to the water.

After a few minutes watching the octopus do the exact same things it had done before, Mulder noticed that Scully and the kids all had the same rapt expressions on their faces. Probably not something that he should point out to her, but still amusing nonetheless. As much as he wanted her to enjoy herself, as she was clearly doing, waiting for this stupid thing to move was beginning to resemble a stake-out. Minus his butt falling asleep. And wanting to pee but having to wait

until a replacement unit showed up. When he couldn't take it anymore, he said, "Haven't you looked at it long enough?"

"Just one more minute," she replied firmly.

"I hate to point this out, butâ€¦ it hasn't moved the last two times we've been in here, why do you think it's gonna move now?"

She looked over her shoulder at him, glaring like he'd interrupted her concentration. "This from the man who obsessed over shark genitalia."

"I thought we weren't going to talk about that anymore. But at least the sharks moved."

"Well, I'd move away from you too if you were speculating onâ€¦ oh, never mind."

"I know what sex you are already, thank you very much."

She blushed, then looked around nervously at the kids who were watching the grown-ups bicker with amused smiles. Her embarrassment was so acute that Mulder could sense it and wanted to alleviate it fast. He opened his mouth to apologize, then gaped. "Scully!"

"What?"

"Look!" He pointed to the tank.

She whipped her head around and let out a long, low "ohhhh." Both of them, children on either side, peered into the water to watch the octopus drag itself a few feet across the interior wall of the tank, slowly putting tentacles forward, then pulling the rest of its body along. When it stopped moving, the kids walked away and Scully turned to Mulder. "I feel much better now. We can go."

"You sure?" he said, bemused.

"Yeah. I saw what I wanted to see. Let's go."

"You're sure you don't want to make a fourth trip through?"

"I think they'd start to look at us funny. But thanks anyway."

The pair headed back to the large elevators and waited for the next one to appear. While they were waiting, Scully studied the tidepool display they had set up. The sea anemones were pulling their feelers in and out as the water crashed over them. On a relatively dry rock, a hermit crab scuttled around. She was in the midst of staring at the small cilia-like hairs on the ends of the starfish's appendages. Fascinating stuff.

"Scully, our chariot awaits," he called out, motioning to the open elevator doors.

Once they were on their way back up to the surface, the guy operating the elevator told them what awaited them once they reached the top. An interactive display, a few more exhibits and the obligatory gift shop.

"Define interactive," Mulder said, his worries about being thrown to the sharks resurfacing.

"There's a small pool upstairs where you can touch some of the animals you saw in the tunnels," the young man responded, just as the doors opened.

"Oh, goodie," Scully muttered.

Mulder grinned at his partner. "Ah, Scully, maybe you'll get lucky, and they'll have an octopus you can pet."

She thought about asking the elevator attendant to turn around, but decided that discharging her weapon in a public place with the intent to seriously wound her partner would put a damper on her vacation plans. She instead pushed her partner out into the hallway and towards the rest of the exhibits.

Mulder breezed by the tank with the jellyfish floating in it and headed straight for the touch pool. It only took Scully a few seconds to figure out why. The attendant was a cute blonde in her twenties, her name tag proclaiming her to be 'Marianne'.

Scully watched from across the room as Mulder pushed up his sleeve and thrust his hand into the small pool. "What's this?" He asked, pointing at what any child could have told him was a sea star.

"It's a member of the star fish family, known as a sea star. If you like, you can pick it up and get a closer look."

"I can, can I?" Mulder asked, a silly grin on his face. Scully took this as her cue to head over and save the poor girl from her partner before he did something stupid.

Sidling up next to him, she elbowed him gently in the side. Once she had his attention, she said quietly, "Mulder, just remember this is an aquarium, not one of your bars. You can't touch anything that isn't in the water, I don't care if it is wearing a shirt that says "Underwater World". Got it?"

"Yeah, yeah, Scully. You always have to ruin all my fun. He was just a lousy waiter, ok?" Mulder felt her nails dig into the flesh of his forearm and instantly regretted his words. "OK, what do you say to a stroll through the gift shop," he suggested through clenched teeth.

"Sounds great," she answered, overly cheerful.

"Have a good day, and come visit again soon," the ever-bubbly Marianne called to the pair as they walked away.

"Don't count on it," Scully mumbled.

Scully let go of Mulder's arm as soon as they were inside the gift store. Once she had freed him, she headed to the rack of postcards by the other entrance, turning it slowly.

Mulder wandered along the back wall, passing by overpriced shirts and

hats, and stopping at a section of shelves full of books. One sitting out front caught his eye. "Clark the Toothless Shark," he said softly. Looking around, he saw that Scully was deeply engrossed in her postcard selection. He'd loved pop up books as a kid, and hadn't seen one in he couldn't remember how long.

About half way through the book, Mulder realized it was the most depressing children's book he had ever read. The poor shark, Clark, had no teeth, and no one liked him. Dumb luck. Then, when someone finally makes him a set, they are so scary that no one wants to be around him, because he looks too ferocious. Poor guy just couldn't win. Mulder closed the book and put it down. He couldn't finish it. Too depressing. He turned his attention to a bin of stuffed animals behind him. Sitting right on top was a furry purple octopus. It had Scully's name all over it. After checking to see that she wasn't around, he picked it up and walked to the nearest cash register. Once he had the toy safely in a bag, he went to find her.

Scully was standing in front of display of keychains. Not that she needed one, but her niece had a collection started and Scully tried to send her one from each of the places she visited. She didn't hear Mulder sneak up behind her.

"Aren't you ready yet?"

"No, Mulder. Just a second." She turned and looked at him. "What did you get," she asked, seeing the bag in his hand.

"This? Umm, it's nothing. I'll show you later."

She shrugged and turned back to the rack in front of her. After a few seconds more, she decided on a keychain and headed for the register. Soon, they were out the door and back onto the pier.

"So, what's in the bag, Mulder? I'm curious."

He handed her the bag. "It's just a little peace offering. Nothing big."

She smiled and took the bag from him. "You know, you didn't have to do this. I pretty much expect you to ruin my vacations."

"Ha ha. Open the bag."

Reaching in the bag, she took out the stuffed octopus. "You know, Mulder. Sometimes, I wonder how you made it through your childhood alive. You have a twisted sense of humor."

"It's my charm, Scully. People can't resist me."

She stared at the octopus, then suddenly burst out laughing. "In your honor, I shall name him Nicky."

"Cute, Scully, real cute."

"What was that you were saying about charm Mulder?"

"Why don't we take a walk down the street and see what else there is to see. I am pretty sure that Ghiradelli Square is this way. I could go for something sweet right about now."

The two of them set off down the Embarcadero, passing cheap tourist shops and an open fish market. Scully had been briefly seduced by the smells wafting out of the Boudin restaurant, but Mulder had managed to pull her back before she could do any serious damage.

"Mulder, have you seen any cabs? My feet are beginning to throb," Scully whined as he dragged her out of the Boudin store.

"No, Scully, not a one. But, if I remember correctly, the cable car turn around is just a block or two more this way. We can catch one of those back to Union Square and have you in your hotel in no time."

"Sounds good. I have never ridden a cable car."

"There's a first time for everything, Scully."

"Shut up and walk, Mulder. My feet are really killing me."

Guiding his partner around some road construction, he urged her forward with his hand on her lower back. She was lucky they were no longer next to the water. She had gone from pleasant to whiny in 10 seconds flat, and he wasn't sure how much more abuse he could take from her today. Thank goodness he could see the turn around just ahead. He had to admit, he couldn't wait to take a seat himself. A nice cable car ride would do both of them some good. And maybe, he would get up the nerve to tell her that he was in the same hotel. He had a feeling that bit of information would be met with serious consternation.

Mulder peered up and down the street, certain that a cab would appear any moment. The cable cars hadn't been running for some unexplained reason, so a decidedly irritated Scully demanded he find them a cab.

The whole time they had been at lunch, and while walking to the cable car turnaround, they must have seen some twenty-odd cabs. But now that they needed one, there were none to be found.

Mulder had taken the initiative to follow a large group of people who had also planned on taking the cable cars. They seemed to know where they were headed. Suddenly, the whole of them stopped, and gathered around the one with a map book. When they all started talking in a decidedly foreign tongue, the agents stopped following them.

"Mulder, don't you think we should just go back down to Pier 39 or over to Ghiradelli Square? At least we know we can find a cab there," Scully asked. The tone of her voice told him that her feet must be hurting just as much as his. But he wasn't about to let on that he would kill for a cab, if need be.

"Aw, c'mon Scully! A little exercise in the fresh air will do us some good. Besides, we aren't that far from Union Square. We could easily walk it from here," he fudged. He didn't have the first clue how far it was to Union Square, but he'd read somewhere that the city of San Francisco was only seven miles across at it's widest point. He figured that Union Square was close to being the center of the city. Hell, three and a half miles was a cake walk for two young, healthy

FBI agents, right?

Scully turned slowly to stare at her partner, her jaw hanging open, eyes wide. "Mulder, I did NOT come to San Francisco to walk all over hell's half-acre! For God's sake, why would I have wasted the money on the rental car if I-" She stopped midsentence. That had been the one detail that she had been determined to keep to herself.

"You're telling me, that this whole time, you had a rental car? You paid for a cab ride to lunch, we have walked all over hell and gone, wasting time waiting for a cab to get back to the hotel, and now you tell me you have a rental car?" Mulder fumed.

"Oh, please! I am surprised you didn't bother to check that little detail when you were spying on me and tracing my travel plans," she shot back.

Realizing that discretion was indeed the better part of valor, Mulder decided that he was not going to respond to the latest of Scully's barbs. If he tried to defend himself now, she would just find something else to zing him about. It was time to forget the problem and work on the solution. Mulder pointed up the street. "There's a bus stop, half a block or so up." He saw her open her mouth to protest. "At least it's a place to sit. We can get off our feet and figure out what to do next."

Scully didn't reply right away. Her feet had just started tingling and it felt rather pleasant. Maybe if they stood there just a few moments longer, her feet would go completely to sleep. To feel nothing from the ankles down was quickly becoming a fantasy of hers. Of course, then she wouldn't be able to walk (though, she failed to see how this was a bad thing), and Mulder would have to carry her. At this point, she felt it was the least he could do. A rather amusing mental picture was forming to accompany that thought.

"Earth to Scully. Hello?" Mulder said, snapping his partner out of her daydream. When her eyes opened, he gestured to the bus stop. "Come on, Scully. It won't come to us, no matter how many times you wiggle your little nose." He held up a hand as she opened to her mouth to speak, silencing her objections before she could raise them. "I am not saying we give up on a comfortable cab ride and take a city bus. But at least we can get off our feet and throw together a plan of attack." He glanced down at her, wishing desperately what the face she was making meant. It seemed to hover between pain and pleasure. For a few seconds, it even appeared to be perfect bliss. That was all the proof he needed: she must be ignoring him.

"Start walking," he said, taking her by the shoulders and turning her towards the bus stop. He gave her a gentle shove to get her moving, and kept one hand hovering around her lower back. If her feet hurt near as bad as his, she could fall down at any moment, from sheer agony.

He scanned the traffic again. Not a cab (or a bus) in sight. He wasn't picky about his transportation, and was willing to take which ever came first. But, he was pretty sure getting Scully on a public bus would take an act of God, if not Congress. Of course, he could be wrong. He took a chance and tested the theory. "And hey, even if we do end up taking the bus, it could be a real adventure," he said as brightly as he could.

Scully swung a weary gaze up at her partner. "Mulder, I am just not a public transportation kind of gal. However, I will gladly go to the bus stop if there is some place to sit," she added, trying to sound positive.

They walked slowly towards the bus stop, Mulder's expression brightening a little when they got closer. "Look, there's even a map of the city. We can figure out how far it is back to the hotel. I know it's within walking distance." He complimented himself on managing to keep up the 'my-feet-do-not-hurt-in-the-slightest' front with that statement, not noticing how his partner had winced at the mention of the word 'walking'. With a bemused look on her face, she took a seat.

He sat down beside her and turned toward the map. "Hey, 'We Are Here'," he said, gesturing to the faded red dot on the map. He was trying to elicit a laugh or at least a smile from Scully. She was sitting in mournful silence on the small swiveling slat of plastic that was masquerading as a bus stop bench. He had to admit, as seats went, these things sucked. The only way to keep yourself balanced was to use your feet. That sort of defeated the purpose of the damn things, didn't it?

Scully sat quietly pondering what she would do when she would do once she was off the streets of San Francisco, and safely ensconced in some form of transportation. So far, two separate, though equally gratifying ideas were forming in her head: what she wanted to do when she got back to her room, and what she wanted to do to Mulder for making her walk all over the place. Neither of these things would be wise to do in public, at least not without fear of prosecution. She decided instead to stay on the safe side and play along with Mulder's little cub scout fantasy.

"We are here, huh? So where in the hell is 'here'?"

"Bay Street and Columbus Avenue," he answered, ignoring her sarcasm. "The hotel's on Stockton, right?"

'The' hotel? He hadn't said "your hotel." But, on the plus side, he hadn't said "our hotel" either. She was one step closer to being on her own. 'Step', she thought. Bad choice of words. Freedom - for her feet as well as her mind - was just a cab ride away. It had to be a cab ride, as she now knew walking back to the hotel was impossible - even if it was just over the innocuous looking hill to their right, it would still mean walking over the hill. For all the trips to the gym over the years, all the laps swam, miles run and stairs climbed, there was no way on God's green Earth Mulder would get her to walk back to the hotel. She stared at the back of her partner's head as he studied the map, willing him to forget his grand ideas about walking back to Union Square.

Mulder couldn't believe it. The way back to the hotel wasn't that far, he was right. But from the little he could remember about San Francisco, it was all up hill and there was no way in hell he would walk all that way up hill with his feet singing in agony. And he could only imagine what kind of racket Scully would put up about it. Closing his eyes, he tried to clear his head and come up with an alternate plan. And it hit him. All he had to do was find a pay phone and call for a damn cab! Why the hell he hadn't thought of this

sooner was beyond him. He had just turned to inform Scully of his brilliant deduction when a bus lumbered around the corner. They both turned towards it, noticing the sign at the top. "30 STOCKTON." With a brief glance at each other, they stood up and walked towards the curb.

Enough was enough, Scully thought. She would just have to deal with being on the bus and add a few minutes and a few extra degrees of heat to her shower.

End
file.